

SHARE [social icons]

Wednesday
June 22, 2011

THE BERKELEY DAILY PLANET

FRONT PAGE COLUMNISTS ARTS & EVENTS THE WEEK FULL TEXT

Arts & Events

Theater Review: Down a Little Dirt Road--Just Theater at the Berkeley City Club

By Ken Bullock

Wednesday June 22, 2011 - 09:50:00 AM

Alice, a young girl, tells fantastic stories about her family life at Show & Tell in school ... Alice and her father, a seismologist, live alone in Parkville, on the San Andreas Fault in the Coast Range (not far, curiously, from where James Dean bought it), sharing their shadowy dreams about her late mother, his wife ... The earth shakes; Alice's house--the walls of the theater--tremble. Only Alice and her father seem to feel it ...

Just Theater's production of Erin Marie Bregman's Down a Little Dirt Road has been playing at the Berkeley City Club for a couple of weeks now. It's received a somewhat lukewarm Chronicle review--which, if you read it carefully, compliments playwright, director, cast and designers on many aspects of the show. The compliments are in order. I wish they went further.

Just Theater has presented two shows at the City Club over the last couple of years, Anne Washburn's I Have Loved Strangers and Jason Grote's 1001. The latter play was a small hit, supported by a number of favorable reviews, including the Chronicle's and one I wrote for the Planet, calling it "hilarious, unpredictable and impossible to pin down."

In a way, those words fit everything I've seen of this thoughtful, unpretentious little company, which presents plays (and readings of plays) by less-known playwrights, from the Bay Area and elsewhere. Down a Little Dirt Road can't be called hilarious; the subject matter is, on the face of it, somber, melancholy--the attempts, imaginative and just coping, by what remains of a family to make sense of the senseless when wife and mother is suddenly gone, dead ... but the script and production values nonetheless are infused with a gentle humor. It is, too, very much unpredictable, impossible to pin down.

It's a delicate labyrinth, a maze of emotions, dreams, adjustments ... Some figure as fantasies the bereaved tell themselves and each other about their family tragedy; others are fleshed out as ghostly wanderings in a kind of zone, a bardo half-living, half-dead, where what's left in memory--of living and dead--is bureaucratically peeled or stripped away, to facilitate "change" ... into another existence, whether living or dead.

Alona Bach, a recent Berkeley High graduate, puts in a wonderful performance as bright, spunky--troubled--young Alice. Lisa Morse as her mother and Anthony Nemirovsky as her father are real troupers, playing fine support both to Alice, the character, and to the idea of the play. Ryan Tasker, familiar to Berkeley theatergoers, mostly for his work with Shotgun Players, plays the cryptic, agent-like McKay skilfully. Molly Aaronson-Gelb's directed this excellent little ensemble with sensitivity, emotional accuracy. And Jon Fischer's set, innovatively using cardboard boxes as both the trembling walls and a sense of the moving and impermanence in Alice and her dad's life, is splendid, well-matched by Christine Crook's costumes, Jarrod Green's lighting, Zachary Watkins' sound design--and some pleasing musical composition by Dina Maccabee.

Down a Little Dirt Road is a satisfying production, staged by a small company with a low budget--especially satisfying in a time when larger companies with bigger budgets attract much more noise and attention to shows from near and far that don't share the straight-forward theatrical, intellectual and emotional values this show so unobtrusively displays. It's one of those productions I found simply pleasing in and of itself--there are a few of those around!--feeling at ease and in focus with the way it's staged--and its graceful avoidance of cliché in skirting what could've been emotional sensationalism, leaving the audience with a remarkable impression of how the memory of a dead loved one changes with time, in step with changes in life and the way we explain all this to ourselves, often in tacit agreement with each other.

SHARE [social icons]



BERKELEY SYMPHONY
Joana Carneiro
MUSIC DIRECTOR

**THURSDAY
FEB. 6, 2014 8pm**

Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley

Music by
STRAVINSKY | ADAMS | MENDELSSOHN

Soloist
ANTHONY MARWOOD, violin

berkeleysymphony.org
510.841.2800

BUY NOW »

Links we like:

- www.BerkeleyArtsFestival.com/
- www.berkeleycouncilwatch.com/
- [Richard Brenneman: Eats, Shoots 'n' Leaves](#)
- [Thomas Lord: BerkeleyNativeSun.com](#)
- [Jane Stillwater's Web Log](#)

Email to [subscribe at berkeleydailyplanet.com](mailto:subscribe@berkeleydailyplanet.com).
and get free email updates.

Less a review here than an impressionistic pitch for this play ... Down a Little Dirt Road runs until July 3; it's an engaging, refreshing, often touching experience that deserves an audience.

Thursday through Saturday nights at 8, Sundays at 5 through July 3rd at Berkeley City Club, 2315 Durant. Sliding scale, \$15-\$30. 306-1184; justtheater.org (including photos of the show).



The Pepper Spray Times

[Read The February Issue](#)
(and please support Grace
Underpressure with a
donation :-)

[Donate](#)

